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# TESTIMONY

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## Availability of Drinking Water in California Public Schools

MARK A. SCHUSTER

CT-305

April 2008

Testimony presented before the California State Assembly Subcommittee on  
Education on April 2, 2008

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**Dr. Mark A. Schuster<sup>1</sup>**  
**The RAND Corporation**

***Availability of Drinking Water in California Public Schools<sup>2</sup>***

**Before the Subcommittee on Education  
California State Assembly**

**April 2, 2008**

Thank you for inviting me.

My name is Mark Schuster and I am a senior researcher at RAND and Chief of General Pediatrics at Children's Hospital at Harvard.

My colleagues and I are working with a California school district to prevent obesity by developing a middle school program to promote healthy eating and physical activity. With a grant from the National Institutes of Health, we have conducted background work for two years and will soon evaluate our program.

We have found that students have limited access to drinking water, especially at meals. In the schools we are studying, water is neither sold nor provided for free in cafeterias. There are no water jugs or faucets with cup dispensers. Water fountains are too few to meet mealtime needs.

Students want water. They want it so much that they buy it from vending machines for \$1, even though 3 out of 4 students in the district meet the household income cutoff for subsidized lunches. Demand is high enough that vending machines run out quickly.

We explored bringing free water to schools through our program. District and school administrators were sympathetic, but gave several reasons why we could not provide free bottled water or jugs of free tap water. They said that a beverage vendor contract prevents provision of free bottled water; that federal regulations prohibit serving water alongside milk; and that it would undermine school efforts to fundraise by selling bottled water and sports drinks.

We later learned that there are no rules blocking provision of free tap water, but the vendor contract does prohibit free bottled water unless it's their brand.

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Therefore, we examined providing filtered tap water in jugs at one school. Not only do students drink it at lunch, but PE teachers borrow the jugs because their students have limited access to water.

As you know, California reports that 1 in 3 children are overweight. Youth—and for that matter, adults, many of whom developed their eating habits as youth—get a lot of excess calories from sugary drinks. Water is healthy and has no calories. Assuring that water is readily available in schools should help prevent childhood obesity.

Thank you.